

Anorexia

Overview

Understanding anorexia nervosa, a serious condition that involves an intense fear of gaining weight.

- Signs of anorexia nervosa
- Causes of anorexia
- Treatment
- Helping someone with anorexia
- Resources

About ½ to 1 percent of all Americans will suffer at some point from the eating disorder known as anorexia nervosa. Anorexia can affect people of both sexes and any age, but it is especially common among female adolescents.

Doctors define anorexia as a refusal to maintain a body weight within 15 percent of the normal minimum. People with the condition have an intense fear of gaining weight and refuse to eat more than small amounts of food, a habit that can be life threatening. Getting help promptly is the key to recovery from anorexia, because the sooner treatment begins, the more effective it is likely to be.

Signs of anorexia nervosa

Signs of anorexia may develop gradually or suddenly. Some of the most common include:

- refusing to maintain a body weight at or above the lowest normal for someone's age and height
- a significant weight loss not caused by another illness
- an intense fear of gaining weight or becoming fat
- a distorted body image or tendency to exaggerate its importance
- missing at least three consecutive menstrual cycles
- unusual or extreme eating rituals, such as refusing to eat in front of others, weighing all portions meticulously, cutting food into tiny pieces, or eating only a few low-calorie foods, such as lettuce, carrots, or apples
- preparing elaborate meals for others and then refusing to eat them

Some people with anorexia try to control their weight through intense exercise or by purging food through vomiting and abusing laxatives, enemas, or diuretics. They are sometimes said to have the bulimic form of the condition. Other people develop health problems because they do not eat sufficient vitamins, minerals, or other essential nutrients. Conditions that can result from anorexia include:

- dry or yellow skin
- brittle nails
- hair loss
- irregular heartbeat and higher risk of heart failure

- loss of bone calcium, which often leads to osteopenia or osteoporosis
- impotence in men
- feeling cold constantly (even on warm days)
- long, fine body hair, especially on the abdomen (which may grow as the body tries to conserve heat)
- dehydration
- malnutrition

In extreme cases, people with anorexia literally starve to death. About 6 percent of those who have the disease die of their illness, so the condition always requires prompt medical evaluation and treatment. In some cases, medical treatment must come before any psychological treatment because the disease can be so physically debilitating.

Causes of anorexia nervosa

Scientists aren't sure what causes someone to develop anorexia. Research has shown that up to 60 percent of women with eating disorders have suffered some form of physical, verbal, emotional, or sexual abuse. In some cases, a variety of factors may be involved. These can include:

- *Genetic and biological factors.* Anorexia tends to run in families, and genes or heredity may play a role (although family members may simply prefer the same kinds of foods or value a thin body more than others).
- *Psychological factors.* Many people with anorexia are perfectionists who have extremely high expectations of themselves. For example, an anorexic may excel in school, but still feel bad about herself. Some experts also believe that people with anorexia may have a legitimate cause for anger, but do not know how to express it in healthy ways, so they turn it against themselves by refusing to eat.
- *Social factors.* Most Americans are bombarded with media images of very thin models, actors, dancers, and athletes in sports such as gymnastics and figure skating. These images can convey an unrealistic sense of what's "normal," and may have a particularly strong effect on adolescent girls who are just beginning to develop a sense of their own identities.

Anorexia may also be connected to a specific "trigger" that places additional social or emotional demands on someone who feels vulnerable or uncertain about his or her identity. The trigger can be a traumatic event -- a death or divorce, a move to a new home or school, or the end of an important relationship. It can also be any disturbing experience that someone doesn't know how to handle, such as teasing at school or unexpected problems in a marriage.

Treatment

If their condition is very advanced, people with anorexia may require hospitalization for treatment of malnutrition and related physical problems. Other courses of treatment may involve a combination of methods prescribed by a physician and a therapist or another psychological counselor. Treatment should include some combination of individual counseling, group or family therapy, nutritional counseling, and medication. Some hospitals have eating disorder clinics that provide a range of therapies or treatment programs on an outpatient basis.

Helping someone with anorexia

Prompt medical attention can save the life of someone with anorexia. If you are concerned about a family member or friend, it's important to insist that the person see a doctor. Here are some other ways to support a person with anorexia:

- *Bring up your concerns.* Talk to the person privately and try to avoid criticizing. ("You're too thin.") Instead, make a neutral comment such as, "I've noticed that you've been skipping a lot of meals lately, and I'm concerned about this."
- *Realize that the person will probably deny the problem.* People with anorexia commonly deny that anything is wrong, even if they are dangerously thin. Plan for how you will respond if this happens. For example, you might ask a trusted friend or family member to take part in the conversation, so that you will have support if the person denies the problem.
- *Show that you love and care for the person.* Anorexia is a complex condition that people can't overcome through "willpower." Avoid making judgments about how someone "ought" to feel about food. Instead show that you love and care for the other person and want to help.
- *Be patient.* With treatment, some people improve in a relatively short time. Others struggle to manage and control their anorexia for years. Be prepared to try different methods of treatment if the first doesn't work. Not all doctors or therapists have experience in treating eating disorders. If yours doesn't, don't hesitate to switch or seek a referral to someone who specializes in the condition.

Resources

Many organizations and Web sites can help you find support and stay up-to-date on treatment methods for anorexia nervosa. Good resources include:

National Association of Anorexia Nervosa and Associated Disorders

847-831-3438

www.anad.org

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

800-950-NAMI (800-950-6264)

www.nami.org/helpline/anorexia.htm

National Institute of Mental Health/Public Inquiries

301-443-4513

www.nimh.nih.gov

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